

## Online Consultations and Events – Top Ten Tips for Government and Civic Hosts – By Steven Clift – 2002/2004/Soon 2009

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### Online Consultations and Events – Top Ten Tips for Government and Civic Hosts v1.1

*2004 Update – While the example links below need to be updated, the lessons and strategies below are still fresh. Also, my [Online Consultation slides are now freely available from my speakers page](#) <sup>[1]</sup>.*

As the concept of "e-democracy" builds momentum, interest in the use of online consultation in government and civil society circles is growing significantly. Online consultations, e-consultations, online public hearings, or online civic events can all be defined as the structured, often time-limited, use of online tools to inform public policy processes and encourage civic participation. By time-limited, I mean an online event with beginning and an end.

This article provides online consultation tips geared toward prospective online consultation organizers. Most of the tips assume an asynchronous event (not real-time or live). Most lessons can be generalized to different models and elements I share below. At the very end of this article I share key links to resources related to online consultation. Let's get started.

#### Online Consultation Top Ten Tips

In summary ...

1. Political Support Required.
2. State Purpose, Share Context.
3. Build an Audience.
4. Choose Your Model and Elements Carefully.
5. Create Structure.
6. Provide Facilitation and Guidelines.
7. Disseminate Content and Results.
8. Access to Decision-Makers and Staff Required.
9. Promote Civic Education.
10. Not About Technology.

In full details ...

#### 1. Political Support Required.

Online consultations with strong and sincere political support are the only ones worth hosting. There must be a political desire for input and a willingness to consider that input in the decision-making process. Expecting that an online consultation will dramatically change the outcome of decision-making process is not generally a requirement. Political listening is a first and reasonable step. We are talking about evolution, not revolution.

#### 2. State Purpose, Share Context.

Citizens want to know the purpose of an online event. They will be skeptical. Share concise and readable information that shares the context of the event. Where in the policy process is this event being staged? The beginning? The end? Let people know in order to establish reasonable citizen expectations. If it is an experiment or "public awareness" exercise that you know will have limited impact, simply be upfront and say so. You have to start somewhere.

#### 3. Build an Audience.

Recruit your participatory audience before the online event starts. Most online consultations fail due to the lack of citizen participation. Why? The public relations engines are not revved up until the event starts – bad move. The pragmatic approach is to recruit participants one at a time. Don't be fooled by the Internet myth that if you build it they will come – they won't. Create specific audience goals from 50 to 1000 people or more. Encourage all prospective participants to join an e-mail announcement list for the event and future events. Carry your audience from one event to the next whenever possible or appropriate. Recruit participants at in-person events and through the traditional and online media for at least two to three weeks before an online consultation starts.

Even with an audience, many discussion-oriented events fail in the first three days because those attracted to the online event are thinking the same thing – "No one has posted yet, this event must not matter." Seeding the early hours of an event with "authentic" posts encouraged behind the scenes combined with e-mail highlights and encouragement to participants will make it a "happening" event.

#### 4. Choose Your Model and Elements Carefully.

Figure out what kind of online consultation you want to hold. Here are different kinds of online elements to consider, combine, and innovate from:

**A. Q and A** – A simple public web page containing questions from citizens (often selectively chosen from those received by e-mail) with responses signed by decision-makers in the organization. Many media sites also use this model in reverse by posing a question with short responses from citizens.

Examples:

Kids Questions to Florida Governor – <http://www.myflorida.com/eog/kidspage/Questions.htm> <sup>[2]</sup>

[Need more examples ...](#) <sup>[3]</sup>

BBC Talking Point – [http://newsvote.bbc.co.uk/hi/english/talking\\_pointthose](http://newsvote.bbc.co.uk/hi/english/talking_pointthose) <sup>[4]</sup>

**B. Document/Policy Comments** – The ability for people to share public comments or add their comments or questions at the end an article or document. Sometimes this evolves into a discussion among readers of a document. I envision this kind of "annotation" on reports and draft proposals in the near term and in the future we may see this with proposed ordinances and legislation. Encouraging people who are browsing similar policy documents and proposals on government sites to communicate horizontally would allow people to generate public opinion and place the agency in a facilitation role. One of most advanced forms of document comments will take place with formal electronic rulemaking procedures.

Examples:

US Federal Trade Commission: <http://www.ftc.gov/privacy/comments> <sup>[5]</sup>

ZDNet AnchorDesk TalkBack: <http://www.zdnet.com/anchordesk> [6]  
US Electronic Rulemaking Examples: <http://www.statelocal.gov/rulemake.html> [7]  
Transit Planning in Finland using IdeaFactory: <http://www.joukkoliikennekeskustelu.net> [8]

**C. Online Guests/Panel** – Decision-maker(s) or expert(s) on a virtual stage answering questions often on a pre-chosen topic for a specific time-frame. This can be done interview style with a facilitator fielding citizen questions or panelist style with interaction among the decision-makers and experts. Some events start with a panel discussion and then open the dialogue up to the public, while others keep the virtual stage tightly controlled. Starting with a panel discussion can get the main issues on the floor and provide a context for more substantial open discussion.

Examples:

Twin Cities Metropolitan Council State of the Region – <http://www.metrocouncil.org/planning/SOR2001/SOR2001.htm> [9]  
Web White & Blue Online Presidential Debate – <http://www.webwhiteblue.org/rcd/> [10]  
Northfield City Hall Q & A: <http://www.northfield.org:81/cgi-bin/WebX?13@@.ee8ab5f> [11]

**D. Online Conference** – When I think of online consultation, a full featured online conference comes to mind. This is pretty much a physical conference or even a public hearing reflected online. Most online conferences take place over one to three weeks and include many of the elements listed here as well as tools like participant directories and often the capacity for small groups to communicate in break out sessions or simulated coffee breaks. See number five below for related comments.

Examples:

Scottish Youth Summit – <http://www.youthsummit.org.uk> [12]  
World Bank International AIDS Economics Network – <http://www.iaen.org/conferences> [13]  
ETFRN Biodiversity Workshop – <http://www.etfrn.org/etfrn/workshop/biodiversity> [14]  
World Bank Development Forum – <http://www.worldbank.org/devforum/ongoing.html> [15] (Multi-month facilitated e-mail list exchanges.)  
Politalk – Public Financing of Stadiums – <http://www.politalk.com/topics/stadium> [16]

**E. Communities of Practice/Interest** – The use of online tools, particularly e-mail group lists (i.e. listservs, mailing lists), will have a direct impact on the implementation of public policy and provide a more informal mechanism for government agencies to communicate with stakeholders on an ongoing basis. This form of informal consultation may allow for more organic influence on the policy process and help government become more attuned to those who they are working with to solve public problems and deliver services. Developing an information exchange grid that connects directly to government implementation may one be of the most cost-effective forms of online consultation. Unlike events with a start and an ending, these exchanges are narrowly focused and are used on an ongoing basis primarily for open group communication.

Examples:

NSW Community Builder – <http://www.communitybuilders.nsw.gov.au> [17]  
Washington State – <http://listserv.wa.gov> [18]  
Eastern Treatment Plant Advisory Panel – <http://www.epa.vic.gov.au/ETP/forum.asp> [19]

**F. Live Chat Events** – Live chat need not be an unwieldy, unmoderated gabfest. Advanced tools exist that allow you to interact in real-time even if the depth of the dialogue is limited. Most chat events feature Q and A with politicians or candidates. The trick is to attract a large enough audience at a specific time. Chat elements can be used to complement asynchronous forums. The use of chat with younger audiences and in educational setting may have special appeal.

Examples:

EU Commission Europa Chats – <http://europa.eu.int/comm/chat> [20]  
Moreland, Australia Chat to the Mayor – <http://www.moreland.vic.gov.au/chat.htm> [21]  
Washington Post Live Online: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/liveonline/politics.htm> [22]  
(Simple "refreshing" HTML-based event)

**G. Live Multimedia Events** – Imagine a lunch speaker or even a press conference where those watching remotely via the Internet or interactive television can submit questions, answer poll questions posed by the speaker, and have access to supplemental content and some day real-time access to digital copies of handouts and testimony text.

Examples:

McCain Speech to Minnesota Meeting – <http://www.netbriefings.com/corporate/press/pr-20011207.html> [23]  
Wisconsin Interactive TV Project – <http://itv.wpt.org/examples> [24]  
NASA Mars Virtual Teacher Training Conference – <http://quest.arc.nasa.gov/marsconf> [25]

## H. More Interactive Elements in Brief -

**Online Polls and Surveys** – Quick and easy online polls, normally unscientific, are most common introduction citizens have with political interaction online. Try crafting useful poll questions (avoid politically divisive questions if you want to set a more deliberative tone) that ease people into expressing their opinions. This is no small task. After someone completes the poll, provide them links to more information on the subject and invite them into your online discussions where they can share why they answered what they did more publicly.

Examples:

Issy, France Citizen's Panel – Results weighted based on community demographics - <http://www.issy.com/SousRub.cfm?Esp=1&rub=8&Srub=46&dossier=12> [26]

**Comment Forms** – Make your comment form intelligent, useful. Ask a set of multiple choice and check list questions along side the usual open-ended comment space. Create a shared information flow where policy related comments are forwarded directly to those who can give a meaningful response. By including top management in the flow of front-line queries you can build their awareness of the type of queries coming into the agency. If most online comments (or comment summaries) directed to a decision-maker are rarely seen by that person, don't give the impression that they are. While comment forms are a form of more "private" citizen to government communication, if your organization can't design comment forms with meaning, then your organization will have an even more difficult time incorporating more public forms of online consultation into your mission and programs.

**Online Petitions** – In many places, people have a legal right to petition their government. While the Internet is full of sites that allow citizens to organize their own petitions, some governments like Scotland and Queensland, Australia are exploring ways to adapt the legal right to petition the government to the online world. Authentication is a serious concern for official petition processes tied to government and parliamentary processes. Instead of authenticating the identity of each person as they sign online, I suggest authenticating the online petition as a whole by verifying the existence of the number of people required to make a petition valid. (I'd compare the telephone and addresses of the people on the petition with various databases and determine whether enough signatures come from known people. A further level of verification could involve contacting a representative sample to unearth fraudulent efforts. Assuming some sort of minimum number of signatures is required for an actionable petition, those well over the number with a verified sample should proceed, those on the margins could be investigated person by person.)

**Online testimony** – If an online public hearing represents the transfer or the full in-person public hearing experience to an online setting, accepting online testimony is the first step toward integrating online interactivity into the traditional hearing process. This could work two ways – people from remote locations could submit materials before, during, or after a hearing for inclusion in the hearing record and in reverse, people at the hearings could distribute electronic copies of their presentations and statements for real-time online release. (I should note that governmental and parliamentary processes vary tremendously from place to place. In Minnesota, legislative committee hearings are the crucial very public part of our decision-making process where experts and citizens can testify, while in many parliamentary forms of government, hearings are rarely held in public.)

**Online Focus Groups** – Online consultation need not be highly public to be effective or useful. There is a significant opportunity for the use of representative groups assembled online by the government and civic groups directly or through third party services. A more advanced version of online focus groups might entail the creation of online “citizen juries” or online components of existing in-person citizen jury efforts.

**Web Forums and E-Mail Lists** – What do you do with your audience when your online event is over? How can you build the online discussion skills of citizens? Consider hosting ongoing discussions or provide links to relevant external online discussion spaces where people can keep talking. Organizing the “online commons” is one of my main passions and is addressed in detail on my other writings <http://www.publicus.net>.<sup>[27]</sup>

Now that we have covered the many models and elements, let’s get back to the tips ...

## 5. Create Structure.

Establish a beginning and an end. Like in-person conferences and events, pay close attention to the use of time and themes. Most online consultations are asynchronous, but the time required for participation is still a key factor. Most people use the Internet as a convenience tool, so don’t expect most people to read a 40 page paper online, much less print it out at their own expense. Consider creating the equivalent of a keynote speech, a question and answer session with a decision-maker, small group break out sessions, and/or panel presentations. Create word limits for keynote speeches and profile essays that you commission – I like 400-600 word pieces myself. Effective online consultations are sometimes designed as pre-conference or post-conference exercises tied to in-person events. What about remote participation during a conference (something beyond a simple video/audio feed and the ability to send in audience questions)? The notion that people not able to attend an in-person event will have a conference-like online experience during the in-person event and gain a sense of meaningful participation is not very realistic. Virtual-only participants will rightfully feel like they are second-class citizens denied the fundamental right to socializing over coffee. Don’t promote such options just so you can say at the in-person conference, “This event is available to millions of people on the Internet right now and they are interacting as we speak.” Ten people on a live video feed with three posts on a complex web board is not a meaningful innovation.

## 6. Provide Facilitation and Guidelines.

Discussion oriented online consultations work best with a welcoming, trusted and often more “neutral” host. This online facilitator, be they an in-house or contracted individual (or a team), will help set the tone and keep the event flowing and on task. They will have the authority to remind organizational decision-makers of their commitment to participate, and deal with problems behind the scenes as required. Someone has to ensure that this “on your own time event” does not mean a contribution by a key decision-maker at the beginning and nothing until the end except an apology for being too busy to participate.

Issues surrounding guidelines, terms of participation, moderation/approval of submissions, removal of content will consume much of your planning time. In governments, expect a review of your guidelines by legal counsel. With good facilitation, you will avoid many of the problems effective guidelines hope to prevent. You cannot control for every political or legal liability, but you can have the event policies in place so you can quickly respond in an even-handed way. You don’t want accusations of censorship to be the only media coverage you receive. Creating the “Other” category for the “junk” to go or profile links to relevant external interactive forums (like newsgroups, web boards, and e-mail lists) can help you maintain the value of your structured topical dialogues while promoting a sense of free exchange. You can essentially say, “If you don’t like what we have put together here, here is where you can go to hold us accountable or cause trouble on someone else’s dime.” Again, you can’t control everything that comes into a consultation, but you can control how prepared you are to respond and deal with opportunities and problems as they arise.

## 7. Disseminate Content and Results.

What outcomes or results will make consultation participants feel like they were part of something important? Make a list and design information products (a tangible result in my opinion) from the start including daily or frequent e-mail updates. In your updates, include diverse and representative quotes from participants and special “guests” in order to share the value of the event. Make the event seem real and something important, just like media coverage does for public meetings and rallies. Prepare event summaries in print, yes print, for distribution to key decision-makers. You need to create incentives for mainstream participation or you will only get opinions from unaffiliated, often agitated individuals. For higher profile online consultations, you want to attract interest group participation and channel (or label) it in a public way. If those with a real political stake in an issue don’t make submissions, your event is too obscure, unless of course your goal is to create a civic exchange free of interest-group influence. Such political cleanliness is your choice, but don’t assume that this format will bring out the voice of the “average citizen” better than other forms of participation. In my opinion, the best it can do is complement and strengthen, but not replace traditional forms of civic participation and consultation.

Making “objective” dissemination of the consultation results part of the package is a strategic choice. Consider incorporating in-person events, broadcast media features, and special newspaper coverage and analysis through partner relationships. For example, you could nominate active participants to be guests on a radio interview show hosted by a consultation partner or use a government or community television show to carry the deliberations to a broader portion of the community.

## 8. Access to Decision-Makers and Staff Required.

This is a key lesson that has been learned the hard way by a number of governments. Before an online consultation starts, establish a system for responding to questions and statements of participants in a rapid, timely, and comprehensive way. During the event (online conference style events in particular) the following types of responses may be required:

- A. Informational Question Responses
- B. Context Provision and Informational Corrections
- C. General Policy Query Response
- D. High-Level Policy Challenge Response
- E. Politically Controversial Query Response

Civil servants must have prior approval to quickly respond to informational questions as well as the latitude to provide additional context including links to or excerpts of content from legally public reference documents. These responses should come within an hour or two during business hours. In all areas, posting an immediate response notifying all participants that a full response is being generated is much better than no response for a few days. Buy yourself the time required to respond in full. With moderated events, don’t hold legitimate queries from public view until your response is ready. This will cause problems.

General policy queries are often best responded to by the line manager in charge of that policy. Providing an authoritative response will demonstrate that your online consultation is being taken seriously within the organization. These responses should come within the same day (or the next morning if received late in the day) a query is submitted or posted.

High-level policy queries and politically controversial statements require special care. As an organization, you want to make sure future online consultations are not jeopardized by a sense among top decision-makers or their staff that this new medium completely overrides their traditional and legitimate power (you need to show

perpetrated by a sense among top decision-makers of their staff that this new medium completely overrides their traditional and legitimate power (you need to show some light at the end of the online consultation tunnel). More importantly, you want to ensure that participants see responses within 24 to 48 hours when controversial issues are discussed. You want top decision-makers to be engaged, so consider a bit of controversy a welcome challenge. One trick, collect a series of more controversial questions and address them as a group to avoid getting into a tit-for-tat argument with one participant.

In order to ensure top-level responses, you need top decision-makers to sign off on a clear chain of command for response generation. At the top level you need to have direct access to a key assistant who will craft a response or simply transcribe a quick response outlined orally by the busy decision-maker. Incorporate mobile phone/SMS/pager access to ensure access to the top for the duration of the consultation. Don't expect to rely completely on the decision-makers ability to type their own responses nor should you rely solely on their ability to directly use your online system at all times. Ideally they will participate directly in the same way as other participants, but unlike the citizens who are most likely to show up, managers and political leaders have a vast range of technical aptitude and differing comfort levels with the Internet. Ask them well in advance to block off an hour every day or two during a two week event – verify that their time is still on their calendar as you launch. You are teaching decision-makers new behavior. If the time to participate is not scheduled, you will likely be holding an online event without anyone with power and influence present. Don't do that.

Finally, in no case should a participant who works for the host organization be required to claim that they do not officially represent the host agency (unless of course they are from another agency or unrelated division). Such disclaimers may be appropriate on third party forums, but with online events sponsored by your organization, such full disclaimers will damage your credibility. If disclaimers are required, put them on the site as a whole not with each post.

## 9. Promote Civic Education.

While online consultations are often designed to solicit input from the public, a strong benefit may reside in their civic education potential. Unlike in-person hearings that often attract the outraged and disgruntled looking to vent, a properly promoted online event will attract many citizens not familiar or active with traditional forms of participation. This may be their first experience with the notion that as a citizen they have the ability to engage and influence public decision-making between elections. Promote the fact that the citizen experience of the consultation is one of the outcomes (deliverables) and look for ways through educational institutions and others to promote use and reuse of the content. Consider ways to turn online consultations into off-line events with greater substance and use online consultation to bring new people into traditional forms of public participation. Think of the Internet as the ultimate civic "icebreaker" that introduces them to democracy between elections and gets them out of the house in the future.

## 10. Not About Technology.

Online consultations are not about technology. The best technological platform will never make an online consultation "naturally" successful. Consultations are about people, not automation. You may need to educate those with a background in more technical e-government services about the principles of consultation and democracy. You will find common ground by focusing on building an effective and responsive government when consultation and democracy seems inefficient in an efficiency technical culture.

You need solid technical support because a poorly considered and implemented technical infrastructure can spoil even the best structured, promoted, and facilitate online consultation. Registration processes should be simple. At a minimum you need most participants to opt-in to receive e-mail notices before, during, and at the conclusion of an event. You can use your e-mail notice permissions to educate people on their technical options and bring people back if technology problems drive them away. Complex systems that require extensive participant learning should be avoided. Watch your server logs closely to determine where people are giving up on your technology. Try and find out if they gave up before giving the content of the consultation a chance.

I suppose you really want to know which tools meet your needs? I have no idea, but you can start your search here <http://www.thinkofit.com/webconf> [28]. In making your decision, I would ask yourself, which tools use approaches familiar to your likely participants? Consider using what other major web sites in your area use to lower the learning curve. For ongoing information exchange with participants over 25 years of age, I am a big skeptic of web-only systems. However, with time-limited events the web allows you to create more structured events than e-mail lists. However, without e-mail participation options (delivery of content via e-mail digests), you will lose much of your audience. Find the right combination of tools and assume that most participants will not return to your online consultations unless you remind them that it is there. I am still looking for the tool that allows full participation (posting via both methods) on an equal or balanced basis between web and e-mail users. If it existed I would recommend it.

Finally, let me conclude by encouraging you to share your further questions and experiences with the Democracies Online – Online Consultation and Civic Events e-mail forum <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/do-consult> [29]. Our goal is to build democracies that thrive, not just survive in the information age. You are at the forefront of an era where lessons are being learned and innovations outpace our ability to know what really works. Like the Internet, civic online consultation will only improve and become successful through trial and error. So let's get busy.

### Network Online Consultation Hosts

Join the [Democracies Online – Online Consultation and Civic Events e-mail list](#) [29] by sending an e-mail to [do-consult-subscribe@yahoogroups.com](mailto:do-consult-subscribe@yahoogroups.com) [30].

### Further Reading

Key Online Consultation Reports Previously Featured on DO-WIRE

Bowling Together: Online Public Engagement in Policy Deliberation  
<http://bowlingtogether.net> [31]

OECD Citizens as Partners Guide: Information, Consultation and Public Participation in Policy-Making (268 pages)  
<http://www1.oecd.org/publications/e-book/4201131e.pdf> [32]

Engaging Citizens in Policy-making: Information, Consultation and Public Participation. OECD Public Management Policy Brief No. 10  
<http://www.oecd.org/pdf/M00007000/M00007815.pdf> [33]

Building Digital Bridges – Creating Inclusive Online Parliamentary Consultations  
<http://www.hansard-society.org.uk/DigitalBridges.pdf> [34]

Electronic Democracy and Educating Young People  
[http://www.teledemocracy.org/documents/html/sweden/youth\\_sweden.htm](http://www.teledemocracy.org/documents/html/sweden/youth_sweden.htm) [35]

New Media and Social Exclusion (report excerpt from Hansard Society)  
<http://www.mail-archive.com/do-wire@tc.umn.edu/msg00279.html> [36]

On-line Engagement – New Models and Implications for Government Departments and Officials  
[http://www.cpm.ca/docs/corporate/ole\\_e.pdf](http://www.cpm.ca/docs/corporate/ole_e.pdf) [37]

Lessons from the Network Model for Online Engagement of Citizens

[http://www.cprn.ca/docs/corporate/lfn\\_e.pdf](http://www.cprn.ca/docs/corporate/lfn_e.pdf) [38]

Electronic Civic Consultation: A guide to the use of the Internet in interactive policy making (Key Dutch report from 1997, found it below)

<http://www.democracy.org.uk/centre/articles/elcivco.pdf> [39]

UK Best Practices and Guides (lesson to be transferred to online):

<http://www.cabinet-office.gov.uk/servicefirst/index/consultation.htm> [40]

<http://www.idea.gov.uk/bestvalue/consult/methods.htm> [41]

Policy Citizen Participation Centre (Canada)

<http://www.policity.com/cp/index.html> [42]

- [Share](#) [43]

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URL to article: <http://stevenclift.com/?p=89>

URLs in this post:

- [1] Online Consultation slides are now freely available from my speakers page: <http://www.publicus.net/speaker.html>
- [2] <http://www.myflorida.com/eog/kidspage/Questions.htm>: <http://www.myflorida.com/eog/kidspage/Questions.htm>
- [3] Need more examples ...: <http://www.publicus.net/e-mail.html>
- [4] [http://newsvote.bbc.co.uk/hi/english/talking\\_pointthose](http://newsvote.bbc.co.uk/hi/english/talking_pointthose): [http://newsvote.bbc.co.uk/hi/english/talking\\_pointthose](http://newsvote.bbc.co.uk/hi/english/talking_pointthose)
- [5] <http://www.ftc.gov/privacy/comments>: <http://www.ftc.gov/privacy/comments>
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- [12] <http://www.youthsummit.org.uk>: <http://www.youthsummit.org.uk>
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- [20] <http://europa.eu.int/comm/chat>: <http://europa.eu.int/comm/chat>
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- [25] <http://quest.arc.nasa.gov/marsconf>: <http://quest.arc.nasa.gov/marsconf>
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- [27] <http://www.publicus.net>: <http://www.publicus.net>
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- [30] [do-consult-subscribe@yahoogroups.com](mailto:do-consult-subscribe@yahoogroups.com): <mailto:do-consult-subscribe@yahoogroups.com>
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